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Potential Arab Reactions to US Efforts To Facilitate the Promotion of Democracy and Development in the Middle East

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Arab citizens' opposition to US policies in the Middle East and perceived differences in values between Arabs and Americans will complicate US efforts to help promote democratization and economic development in the region, according to expert panelists at a recent seminar sponsored by the

- Poll findings suggest that many Arab citizens believe that the United States is more interested in achieving geopolitical gains than in improving living conditions.

Panelists noted that members of the Arab public would better receive US democratization and development programs if, among other things:

- They were tailored to meet the specific needs and capabilities of individual countries.
- Arab Americans were used as interlocutors to promote US programs.
- The United States was perceived to be more sensitive to cultural differences, such as the role of women.

Public Opinion Polls Reveal Deep Tensions

Path-breaking Gallup and Zogby International (ZI) polls conducted earlier in 2002 found substantial negative feelings toward the United States in the Muslim world but differed in what motivated the ill will:

- They were disinclined to see the United States as trustworthy, friendly, caring about poorer nations, or willing to share technology.
- Gallup found that majorities in Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia think Western values

Comparing the Gallup and Zogby Polls

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Issues of Particular Concern for Development

Conference participants laid out a number of Arab perceptions of the West that could specifically affect the success of US-sponsored initiatives for development and democratization.

One perception is that the United States imposes reforms on countries without asking for local input. Many participants noted that US development initiatives often appear patronizing to Arab citizens, generating resistance instead of cooperation:

- Arab citizens support better health care, technology, and civic freedoms but do not want reforms imposed on them by foreign institutions or governments. Instead, they want to play a key role in the development and realization of such projects themselves.
- Messages from projects such as the UN Development Program Arab Development Report that are initiated and carried out by respected Arab scholars are much better received in the Arab world than those engineered by "external" organizations, scholars, or states.

Several participants noted that Arab women strongly resist American efforts to impose reforms on their societies that are based on Western perceptions of what Arab women need:

- One expert explained, for example, that Saudi women want gender equality and job opportunities but want to play a key role in determining how these objectives are met within the confines of their culture and Islamic society.

Many individuals in Arab countries also doubt the sincerity or usefulness of US efforts to promote democratization and economic reform, according to several of our experts:

- Civil societies already believe that the United States denies funding to Islamists, Arab nationalists, and other groups whose views differ from theirs, according to a recent academic study.

- Arab governments also have a history of misusing foreign democratization funds by encouraging foreign donors to allocate them to state-run human rights, election, and other "pseudodemocracy" organizations that undermine genuine democratization initiatives in the private sector.

US media reporting and commentary on the Middle East will continue to have a strong influence on the shaping of these and other perceptions:

- One expert noted that, although al Jazirah has a powerful influence on Arab opinion of the West, the statements of prominent US political, religious, and social leaders in the US media have much more.
- One of the region's most well-received "messages" was President Clinton's allusion to the great civilization of Iran when offering aid to Tehran.

Bridging the Divide

Arab citizens in many countries would respond more positively to US programs that were presented and supported by successful Arab Americans:

- Participants noted that the US Muslim and Arab communities are among the most affluent and successful in the world, and their success would reflect positively on the United States.
- One expert noted, for example, that, in his own efforts to promote democracy in the Middle East, having a Muslim American present ideas and funding to Arab institutions "cleansed" them of perceived US Government influence.

Several experts thought that Arab perceptions of the West also would improve significantly if Arabs had greater exposure to the West through cultural, education, and other exchanges:

- One expert noted that he did not see how any Middle Easterner visiting the United States could be

convinced that all of the negative stereotypes about America are true.

- Arabs also might gain a better understanding of the role of authority in the United States, which tends to differ from that in the Arab world. Because of the nature of many Arab governments, they tend to view authority as oppressive and unfair while Americans tend to see it as more apt to protect their interests.

Participants thought Arab perceptions of the United States might also improve if Arabs were portrayed favorably in the US media. They would gain, in part, an impression that the United States knows, understands, and listens to them:

- One participant suggested, for example, that an American movie similar to *Gandhi* that lauds the positive things about the Arab world would impress Arabs.